

drip simultaneously to the ground.

Ellis, the neighbor, on his side of the fence, fills a plastic shopping bag, his branch riding a little higher with each piece of fruit he picks. Clete looks over the fence, catching him red handed. He says, "I'm gonna saw that branch off and haul it back to my side of the fence."

Ellis blushes and says, "Hey, Clete. Guess you caught me."

Clete laughs and says, "Help yourself, Ellis. We got more goddam plums than we know what to do with."

Ellis says, "Yeah, they all come at once, don't they?"

A sparrow's head falls out of the tree and lands silently at the scarecrow's feet. Ellis picks a dark soft plum and drops it in his bag. Clete takes the bowl he's filled into his wife Juanita, who's getting ready to make some jam. Dave licks his paw, then dozes in the tree. The scarecrow sways slightly in the breeze, losing his fedora. The ants come for the sparrow's head, starting on the soft dark eyes.

ELLIS GETS HIS BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Sheila, the hired dancer, came in really moving: she'd almost frozen to death waiting for her cue out on the patio in her g-string and pasties. They had the birthday boy, Ellis, perched on a bar stool in the middle of the living room. When he saw her cha-cha through the sliding glass door, he started grinning like a possum eating shit.

The men hooted and women frowned and figeted. As Sheila's blood started to circulate, she stepped things up, rolling her shoulders to make her breasts jiggle, then sliding down to the floor, doing the splits on the shag rug. Ruth, Ellis' wife, sat on the folding chair over by the T.V. and gritted her teeth. She saw nothing funny at all about a young woman displaying her body in this manner.

Sheila bounced off the rug and tossed her mane of hair. She smiled at the guest of honor and bent over to give him a look at her ripe, drooping young breasts, licking her lips, beckoning him to come to her.

He started to drool.

Ruth crushed her wine glass in her fist. And Clete, Ellis' buddy and the party's entertainment director, touched his

glowing cigar to the dancer's protruding bun.

Flesh sizzled.

Sheila leaped, and almost surely would have broken the world's long-jump record had her spread-eagled flight not been stopped short by Ellis.

Her crotch, with its little red triangle of cloth, hit his face with a thud. Her legs fell over his shoulders and her flight came to a halt. The stool tilted backwards, hanging for a second at a forty-five degree angle as she windmilled her arms, scooping air like a back-stroking swimmer.

A flash-bulb went off and Clete yelled, "GOT IT!" Then the stool and Ellis and Sheila fell.

Ellis stood up with a bloody nose. Sheila stood up mad, with a cherry-red blister on her butt the size of a fifty-cent piece. She charged at Clete, with the intention of killing him. He dropped his camera and his cigar and sprinted out the door. The naked woman with his brand on her backside followed him. Ruth picked up the camera and tore the film out. Juanita, Clete's wife and the party's hostess, picked up the cigar and dropped it in the garbage disposal. The guys gathered around Ellis, calling him an old goat, slapping his back, and asking him what it was like, that brief encounter.

RUTH AND ELLIS CELEBRATE VALENTINE'S DAY

Ellis bought Ruth a candy-filled red heart the size of a trash-can lid and Ruth set an especially nice table, with flowers and crystal wine glasses. Ellis poured the champagne and said, "To us," raising his glass. After three more glasses, he ducked under the table and snatched his wife's shoe from her foot.

"Ellis, don't," she said. "You can't drink champagne from a slipper."

He fixed her with a romantic gaze and said, "Watch me."

Ruth turned away and said, "Oh gross."

Ellis poured and drank. The slipper's soft fabric soaked up most of the bubbly but Ellis got a mouthful, along with an old corn cushion.

He choked on it.